

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 268 504

CS 008 402

AUTHOR Flickinger, Gayle Glidden
TITLE Language, Literacy, Children's Literature: The Link to Communicative Competency for ESOL Adults.
PUB DATE Mar 84
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Texas State Council of the International Reading Association (12th, Corpus Christi, TX, March 1-3, 1984).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Education; Adult Programs; Adult Students; Annotated Bibliographies; *Childrens Literature; *English (Second Language); *Reading Materials; Second Language Instruction; *Second Language Learning; Second Language Programs
IDENTIFIERS Reading Motivation

ABSTRACT

Developing literacy in adults who speak English as a second language (ESL) means more than rote memorization of letters and sounds, because literacy implies a familiarity with the language and culture sufficient for comfortable interaction and communication of ideas to others. Literacy can be defined as (1) a matter of language, (2) having many human dimensions, (3) developmental, (4) something that is learned, (5) a cultural matter, and (6) a complex matter to communicate abstract ideas. Therefore, it seems that developing literacy through the use of well-written literature would be most appropriate. Good children's literature is particularly suitable for use in ESL classes because the expression of ideas is simpler in language and form than in literature written for adults. Works of literature that might be of use include Judith Viorst's "Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good Very Bad Day," "When Will I Read?" by Miriam Cohen, "A Letter to Amy" by Ezra Jack Keats, and "Mother Lost Her Job Today" by Judy Dalton. The selections have been chosen because they represent well-written literature and have well-developed characters in accurately described settings to give readers insight into language, customs, and culture. (DF)

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LANGUAGE, LITERACY, CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: THE LINK TO COMMUNICATIVE
COMPETENCY FOR ESOL ADULTS

by

Gayle Glidden Flickinger
Associate Professor
Education Department
Plymouth State College
Plymouth, NH 03264

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LANGUAGE, LITERACY, CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: THE LINK TO
COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCY FOR ESOL ADULTS

Developing literacy in adults to whom English is a second language, means more than the mere rote memorization of letters and sounds. Literacy implies a familiarity with the language and culture sufficient to be comfortable interacting and communicating ideas to others.

Don Holdaway defines literacy as (1) a matter of language, it is inconceivable to learn to talk separately from learning to listen, (2) literacy has many human dimensions; human organisms engage globally in language activity, (3) literacy is developmental and developmental learning is highly individual and non competitive, (4) literacy is learned, punishment and fear are impediments to learning, (5) literacy is a cultural matter and alienation is often felt by speakers of non English, 6) literacy is a complex matter and is used to communicate abstract ideas.

Therefore, it would seem most appropriate to develop literacy through the use of the medium of well written, authentic literature. Such literature is concerned with the deepest human preoccupations common to all peoples and may transcend cultural differences and through its reading, provide deep satisfaction. Literature presents the universal human condition from a great wealth of background material. Thus literature will be culturally meaningful to different groups. Today, it is more important than ever, in an environment of cultural diversity to free our learners from the limitations of the controlled vocabulary readers that present the American culture from the

very narrow middle class view. Literature has an appeal across cultures because literature shows human motives for what they are, inviting the reader to identify with or to react to a fictional character. Literature also provides form for experience. We look back on our lives, we notice high spots, such as, "I remember when or that was a real milestone."

Literature sorts out the world into elements we can identify and examine: friendship, greed, family, sacrifice, childhood, love, advice, old age, treasures, snobbery, and compassion are set before us to observe. Literature helps us to focus on essentials and it permits us to experience with different intensity but with new understanding the parts of life we have known. "That's how it happened to me. That's what it would be like to.."

Literature can reveal the institutions of society and literature clarifies our reactions to institutions by showing appropriate circumstances where people give in or struggle against them. Literature reveals nature as a force that influences us and affects our lives. Literature can help the ESOL learner recognize familiar feelings and sensations when described through English language and culture.

Literature for children should do the same for young readers as literature does for adults. Children themselves are different from adults; in degree not in kind. They seek pleasure in a story or a poem, but the sources of their pleasure are more limited than those of adults'; children may not understand the same complexity of ideas. Since their understanding is more limited, the expression of ideas must be simpler, both in language and form. Related to the necessity for simplicity in

expression of ideas are vocabulary and attention span. The vocabulary not limited by quantity or difficulty has clarity and accuracy of description. Stories are more directly told, with fewer digressions and more obvious relationships between characters and actions, or between characters themselves. The many discoveries that children can make through literature can be shared by adults. Most especially by those adults whose native language is other than English.

Judith Viorst in her book, ALEXANDER AND THE TERRIBLE, HORRIBLE, NO GOOD VERY BAD DAY, (Atheneum, 1977), describes the kind of day that plays havoc with our lives from time to time. Alexander could tell it was going to be such a day because he went to sleep with gum in his mouth and woke up with gum in his hair. When he got out of bed, he tripped over his skateboard and by mistake, dropped his sweater in the sink, while the water was running. Then he knew for sure that it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. He considered moving to Australia. The reader may be glad to find that some days are like that for other people, too.

The first days of school can often hold anxiety for both the parent and child, WHEN WILL I READ? by Miriam Cohen, (Greenwillow, 1977), deals with a young boy's desire to learn to read. Jim tries so very hard and the teacher is encouraging, but the other students make faster progress and seem to learn so much easier. Time passes, then it happens. A story that gives some insight into the activities that go on in an ordinary first grade classroom. A story that could be used to show the ESOL adult

reader that even native born youngsters may struggle with learning to read the language.

Another Miriam Cohen book allows the adult to share the fear of a new experience in her LOST IN THE MUSEUM (Greenwillow, 1979). Here an elementary school classroom goes on a field trip to a museum and the teacher's instructions are ignored when a group of the children go off to find the dinosaur display. The day is saved from disaster when another classmate proves his bravery. It gives the adult reader an idea of what might be expected to happen on a field trip and the rich experience that a museum trip can provide.

A LETTER TO AMY by Ezra Jack Keats, (Harper & Row, 1968), finds a young boy caught in a predicament when he makes a hard decision. Peter is having a birthday party and his pals in the neighborhood are eager to come and help him celebrate, but the person Peter wants most to invite is a girl. He writes her a special letter and trudges out in the rain to mail it, but before he can reach the mailbox, something extraordinary happens and leaves him in doubt as to whether or not she will come to the party. The setting of this book is in the inner city and its subject would make a good springboard for discussions on different birthday customs.

Idioms and figurative language can be very difficult for the ESOL adult to master and a picture book is a very pleasant way to learn these constructs through the written word and colorful illustrations. Fred Gwynne in his A CHOCOLATE MOOSE FOR DINNER, (Simon and Schuster, 1976), writes some idiomatic fun and nonsense. "Mommy says there are airplane hangers," and there is

an illustration showing large airplanes attached to even larger coat hangers. "Daddy says he has the best fishing tackle," is accompanied by a picture showing an extremely large fish being tackled by a football player. Figurative language brings smiles and laughter mixed in with some real learning on the part of the readers, whatever the age.

Another book written about the experiences of a very literative thinker who follows written instructions on the most literal level, introduces to us to AMELIA BEDELIA written by Peggy Parish, (Scholastic Book Services, 1963). Checking the written instructions left by her employer, very puzzled, she takes pencil and paper and settles down to draw the drapes. Thus begins her day in the Roger's house. Changing, dusting, dressing and trimming all are directions that are followed exactly, bringing about some very humorous consequences.

A more realistic story that is set in the not too distant past, is Cynthia Rylant's WHEN I WAS YOUNG IN THE MOUNTAINS, (Dutton, 1982). It tells of growing up in the mountains and describes a way of life within a family. The effect the mountains have on their lives during a period of time.

A very simple story of a family, a storm and an island in summer is Robert McCloskey's TIME OF WONDER, (Puffin Books, 1957). The family spends its summer enjoying life on an island and then excitement mounts as the island community prepares to weather a severe summer storm. The ebb and flow of the brief summer season with the family activities gives a glimpse of American life and recreation.

Taking a look at a minority culture through the eyes of a character in children's literature selection can give the adult reader feelings of nostalgia or of identification as a young Mexican girl craves a special doll for Christmas. ROSA by Leo Politi, (Scribners & Sons, 1963), depicts such a child's wish and sets the scene in a Mexican village. Surprisingly, there is a new "doll" present when Rosa returns from her Christmas wishing trip.

Explaining death to a child is not an easy task for any adult, Judith Viorst in THE TENTH GOOD THING ABOUT BARNEY, (Atheneum, 1971), gives some insights as to how a typical family can begin to explain the death of an animal to a very little boy. The reader is given a glimpse of how one family worked through the grief and loss of a beloved pet.

MOTHER LOST HER JOB TODAY, by Judy Dalton, (Whitman, 1980), deals with a mother, the head of the household loosing her job while her daughter can't understand her mother's emotions and fears. Her mother reassures that all will work out soon and in time she will be able to feel good again.

Given the status of the family in our present day culture, A FATHER LIKE THAT, By Charlotte Zolotow, (Harper & Row, 1971), gives the reader the chance to see how one youngster handles the loss of a father and how the mother supports the child's search for a father and how the mother supports the child's search for a father figure with whom to identify. Simple illustrations by Ben Shecter portray typical homey scenes with mother and son.

Step parents are a fact of life to many children today and Judith Vigna handles some of the fears and anxieties very well in

SHE'S NOT MY REAL MOTHER, (Albert Whitman, Chicago, 1980). A young girl must adjust to her father's new wife while she struggles with her own feelings and the fear of being less than loyal to her own real mother. An incident that could have proved disastrous is a turning point in the story and then trust begins to build between step parent and child.

A picture book, illustrated by Marc Simont, showing adults getting ready to go to work, THE PHILHARMONIC GETS DRESSED by Karla Kuskin (Harper & Row, 1982), gives information and details on the ninety-two men and thirteen women preparing for the evening's performance. A great book to stimulate discussion of a variety of life styles.

PHILIP HALL LIKES ME I RECKON MAYBE by Bette Greene (Dial, 1974), centers on eleven year old Beth's first crush and how she deals with other problems of growing up. It is a story of a family living in rural Arkansas and gives a glimpse of a minority (black) culture in the America.

These selections were chosen because they represent well written literature and have well developed characters in accurately described settings to give the reader some insight into language, customs and culture.

Children's Literature stories have action, excitement, some suspense, and enough conflict to develop interest quickly. The plot allows the reader to become involved with the action, to feel the conflict developing, to recognize the climax when it occurs and to respond to a satisfactory ending. The story line can carry the reader along and provide information and insights into everyday life in our culture. The characters are lifelike

and develop throughout the story, their strengths and weaknesses are shown through narration, conversation and description.

Readers unfamiliar with English can improve their reading and language through stories with a strong plot and well developed characters while learning more about the American culture and customs. Familiarity with good children's literature selections can give the ESOL learner the opportunity for sharing these stories with family and friends.

Such literature sharing can contribute to a sense of self esteem on the part of the learner and insure respect from other members of the family. When learning is pleasurable, greater learning takes place. Children's Literature provides pleasure and the chance to learn more about the language and customs of a particular culture and it can be a most effective tool in developing literacy in an ESOL adult.

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